

Political Engagement in the Australian Digital Context*

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Introduction

This paper is in three main sections and is based on approximately ten years of my research into digital political engagement in Australia. I focus first on how young citizens use digital media to engage in politics, and show that these shifts have increased political equality by including more voices in public life. I particularly focus on the idea of *engaged citizenship* where processes of personalisation and storytelling now dominate, and there has been a shift away from the norms of the dutiful citizen with set allegiances and ideologies. Second, I consider how new advocacy organisations have emerged that use digital tools to change and challenge traditional politics and the existing policy agenda. Lastly, in thinking about the role for representative government in this new and changing environment, I introduce the idea of digital rights that brings to the fore current concerns about commercial social media platforms' collection and targeting of data, as well as contentious issues such as privacy, surveillance and freedom of speech.

How citizens participate online

Thinking about political engagement in terms of what individuals do, and where the internet now features as a mobiliser or space for participation, preoccupies most of us who study participation. From 2013 to 2015 I led a comparative project called The Civic Network where we sought to understand how the internet and social media were transforming the way young people were engaging in politics in Australia, the USA and the UK.

To analyse political engagement we constructed two distinct measures—the first was *individual political engagement*, and was based on a series of questions about 12 distinct acts of civic or political engagement (modelled on items used by Zukin et al).¹ This inclusive list featured conventional political activities such as contacting leaders and trying to influence how others might vote in an election, as well as more civic-oriented acts like raising money for charitable causes, and newer political

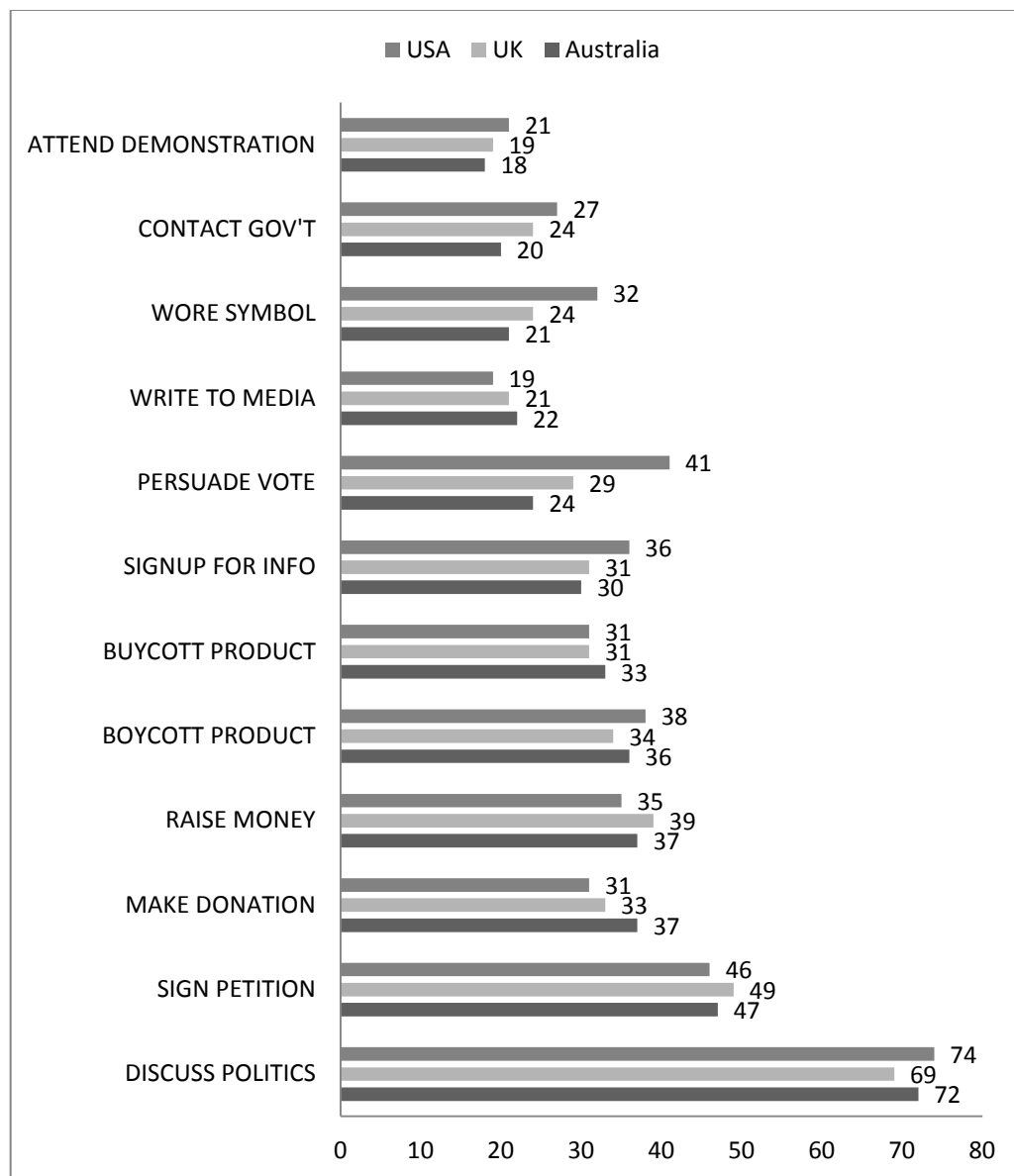
* This paper was presented as a lecture in the Senate Occasional Lecture Series at Parliament House, Canberra, on 17 August 2018.

¹ Cliff Zukin, Scott Keeter, Molly Andolina, Krista Jenkins and Michael X. Delli Carpini, *A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing American Citizen*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2006.

activities such as buying (or not buying) goods or services based on political or ethical reasons, as well as attending a demonstration or a political rally.

Figure 1 shows the distribution across the three countries of what proportion of young people had participated in each act in the previous year. There is only one act which a majority had participated in—discussing politics with friends and family. An average of 19 per cent of young people across the three countries had not participated in *any* of these 12 acts in the previous year—or 81 per cent of young people had engaged in at least one form of individual political engagement (with a mean of 4.10 acts and a standard deviation of 3.88), demonstrating a broad spread of political engagement

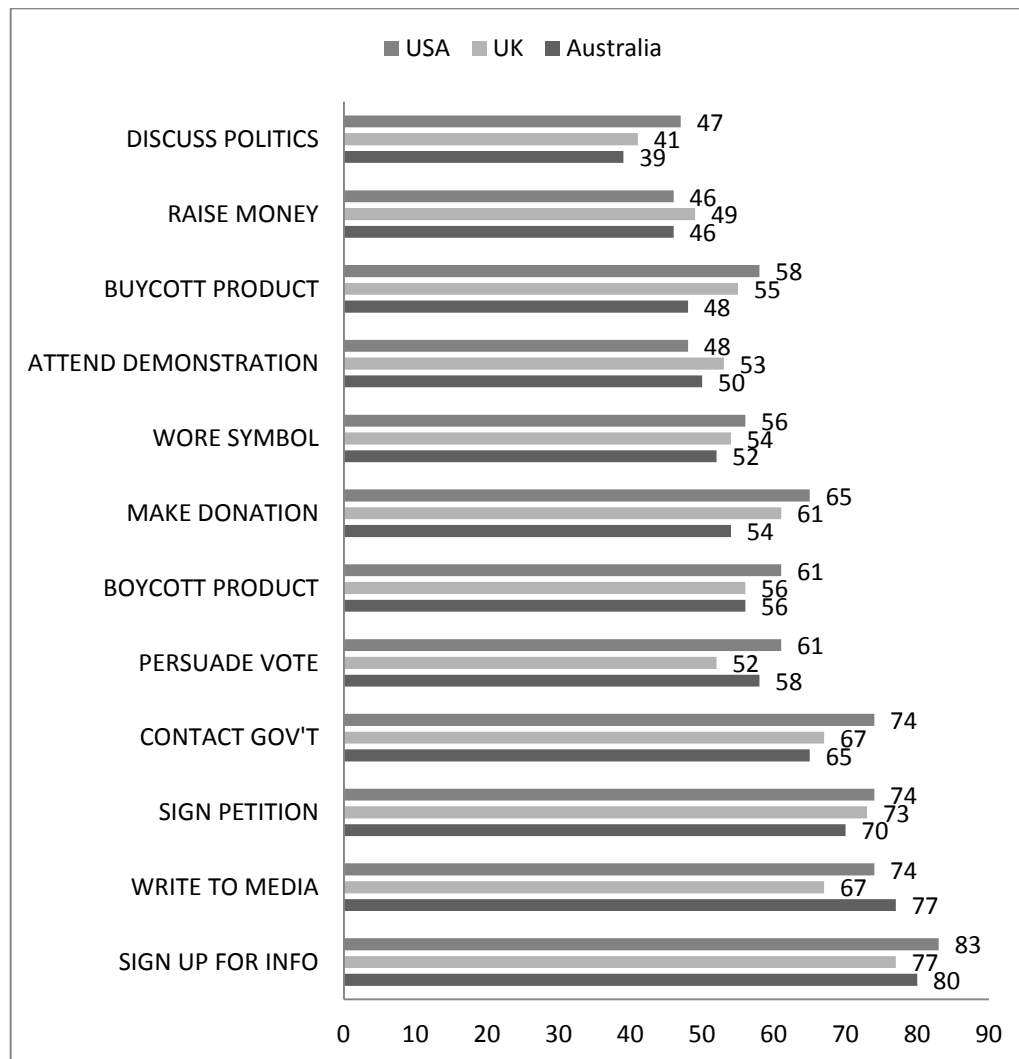
Figure 1: Per cent of individual political engagement in previous year²



² Adapted from Vromen, Xenos and Loader, *ibid.*

among most young citizens.³ There were relatively few differences across the three countries, with the 12 acts staying in more or less the same rank order of occurrence. The exceptions are the two acts of ‘persuade others to vote’ and ‘wearing a symbol’ which young Americans were much more likely to have done. This can be attributed to the 2012 Presidential election having occurred within the year timeframe the survey applied to.

Figure 2: Per cent of individual political engagement acts performed online⁴



Participants were also asked whether they engaged in these activities either online, offline, or in some combination of online or offline forms. Figure 2 shows that in all three countries most of these political acts are no longer mainly engaged in offline by

³ Ariadne Vromen, Michael Xenos and Brian D. Loader, ‘The Networked Young Citizen as POPC (permanently online, permanently connected) Citizen’ in Vorderer, Hefner, Reinecke and Klimmit (eds), *Permanently Online, Permanently Connected Citizen: Living and Communicating in a POPC World*, Routledge, London, 2018.

⁴ Adapted from Vromen, Xenos and Loader, *ibid.*

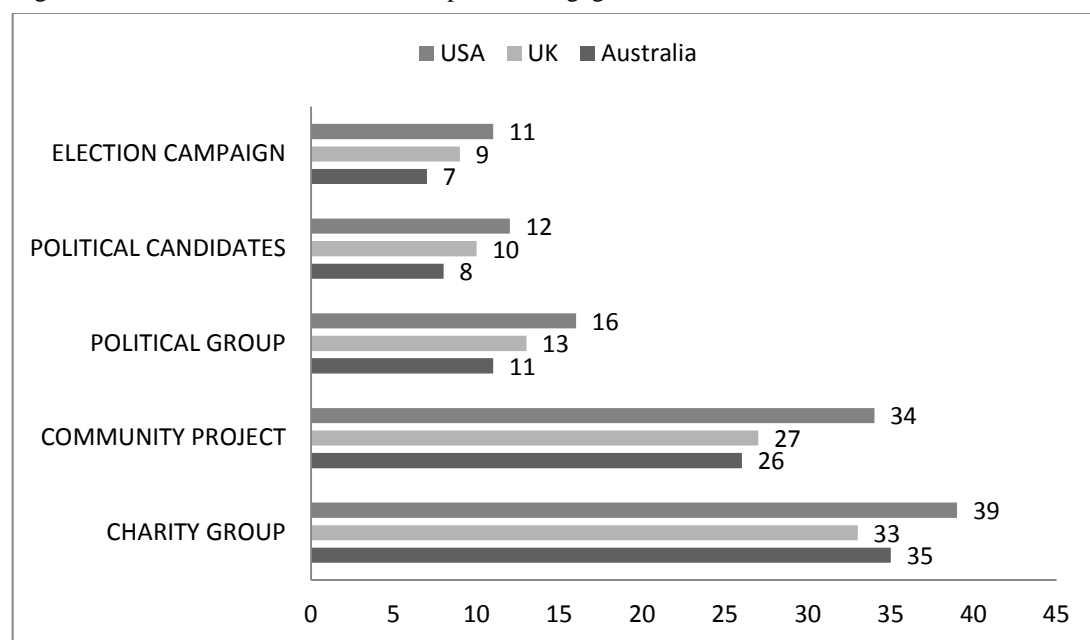
young people. In fact, participation happened online for over two-thirds of young people who:

- signed up for information
- wrote to the media
- signed a petition
- contacted government.

There were only two acts that clearly remain offline for a majority of young people across all three countries—raising money and discussing politics. The majority preference to discuss politics mainly offline and in person is significant for thinking about how political talk occurs (or not) on social media platforms and within young people’s networks.

We also wanted to understand political activities that specifically involved citizens working with others in organisations and groups, or *collective political engagement*. Similar to individual political engagement, we sought to capture a wide array of types of engagement, and included items related to political groups or causes, non-political or charitable groups, and groups associated with political candidates or parties. In all, we asked participants whether they joined, worked, or volunteered with five different kinds of groups, allowing them to count activities that may or may not have involved the internet to varying degrees. Figure 3 shows that young people were less likely to have participated in collective political engagement than most of the individual acts.

Figure 3: Per cent involved in collective political engagement⁵

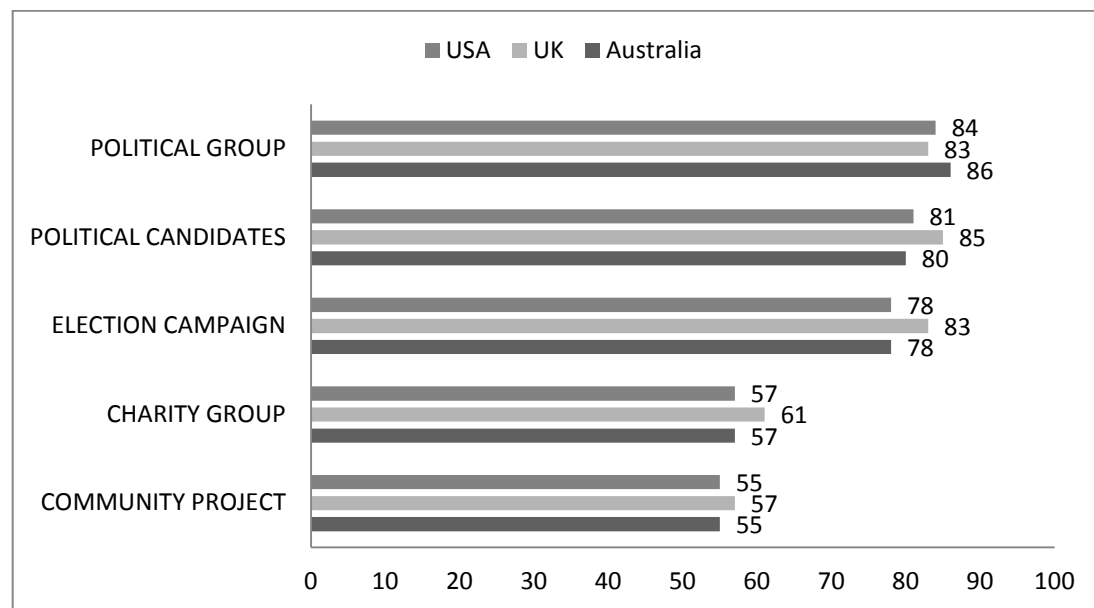


⁵ Adapted from Vromen, Xenos and Loader, *ibid.*

In fact an average of 54 per cent of young people across the three countries had *not* been involved in a group. Young people in all three countries were more likely to have been involved in a charity group or community project than a more explicitly political group and young Americans were more likely to have been involved in all five groups than Australians or Britons.

Figure 4 shows whether internet use featured in young people's collective political engagement. Interestingly the three more overtly political groups were much more likely than the charity group or a community project to involve the internet. Digital mechanisms have become an integral part of young people's political and electoral campaigning, but are used more sporadically by grassroots civic groups.

Figure 4: Percent of collective political engagement involving some internet use⁶



The communicative shift in participation for individuals

While digital first is important for many individual and collective acts of engagement, what of the role of social media platforms? Australians are some of the heaviest users of social media and smart phones across the world. Social media use, predicated on interaction between an individual and a list of friends or followers, has become ubiquitous. For example, in Australia alone Facebook has 15 million users, Twitter nearly 3 million, Instagram around 5 million, and newer platforms such as Snapchat are growing in popularity all the time. This means 63 per cent of all Australians have a Facebook account, while 97 per cent of young people under 25 are on Facebook, and nearly 40 per cent of people under the age of 30 use Twitter every

⁶ Adapted from Vromen, Xenos and Loader, *ibid.*

week.⁷ These free social media platforms are fun and easy to use, and are based on building community and promoting interaction with others.

Over the last fifteen years or so there has been extensive debate about the extent of the internet's capacity to be a new outlet for civil society and to increase citizen-based engagement. Access to internet-based technologies was initially characterised as a digital divide, based on class differences, but the advent of mass use of social media, in particular Facebook, challenged some of the perceptions of what the internet can be used for and how social networks lead to participation. New types of political campaigning and organisation have been facilitated by innovative digital tools, and political organisations have emerged that exist primarily online. The 2008 Obama Presidential campaign heralded a new phase in the use of innovative digital technology and social media for mobilisation, and is still often used as the comparator for all that has come since. The campaign also showed the importance of online donations and fundraising as a cornerstone of contemporary campaigning, and the requisite sophisticated technology and databases needed for accurate tracking and targeting data.⁸

There has been an extensive debate over the capacity of online politics to both deepen and expand citizen participation. In an early evaluation of whether the internet facilitates political engagement, Pippa Norris differentiated between 'cyber-optimists' and 'cyber-sceptics'.⁹ While there is less polarity now in positions taken by those who write on the democratic potential of online political engagement, disagreement and different interpretations about its value for participation remain. Many argued that the internet provided *new* ways of participating in political processes and thus merited original analysis. The internet extended the space available for what was already known about the individualisation of political engagement, but also incorporated politics into other parts of social and economic life that were also increasingly happening online. Social media use rapidly became politicised in two ways. First, via citizens sharing political and civic information with peers in semi-public spaces, and second, through the political sphere adopting or incorporating these mechanisms for contacting citizens. Andrew Chadwick suggested that citizen use of the internet had the capacity to change political engagement irrevocably:

⁷ David Cowling, 'Social media statistics Australia – January, 2016', *Social Media News*, www.socialmedianews.com.au/social-media-statistics-australia-january-2016/; Ariadne Vromen, *Digital Citizenship and Political Engagement: The Challenge from Online Campaigning and Advocacy Organisations*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2017.

⁸ Bruce Bimber, 'Digital media in the Obama campaigns of 2008 and 2012: Adaptation to the personalized political communication environment', *Journal of Information Technology and Politics*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2014, pp. 130–50.

⁹ Pippa Norris, *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty and the Internet Worldwide*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, pp. 96–8.

Political life in Facebook ‘piggybacks’ on the everyday life context of the environment, in much the same way as ‘third places’ function in community building, social capital, and civic engagement away from the home and the workplace. Politics here aligns itself with broader repertoires of self-expression and lifestyle values. Politics in Facebook goes to where people are, not where we would like them to be.¹⁰

Chadwick saw that social media was taking offline approaches to produce everyday forms of political engagement and community building online. Leading scholars suggested that online spaces and social media have changed political engagement to the extent that communicative acts in and of themselves are a form of political engagement that we need to better understand.¹¹ The Pew Internet and American Life project pioneered research on social media based engagement and identified that young people lead the way in posting views about political and social issues; sharing news articles; following politicians and watching political videos.¹²

In The Civic Network project we analysed how young people in the UK, Australia and United States were using Facebook and Twitter for political engagement. Figures 5 and 6 show the incidence of different kinds of Facebook-based actions among young people aged 16 to 29 (over 90 per cent of young people in each country used Facebook and the Table is based on them). A majority of the young people surveyed in all three countries who use Facebook follow links to news or political information posted by others into their newsfeed. Overall large numbers, up to 40 per cent, are doing symbolic work on Facebook of liking and sharing the political views and posts of others. Arguably these acts are now very important within the semi-public networks of extended friends and family, and often communicate young people’s identity and world views. Over a third of young people also post comments on politics or social issues, suggesting that it has become a normalised space for everyday discussion and debate for politically engaged young people. The symbolic uses of social media to express political viewpoints are also important. For example,

¹⁰ Andrew Chadwick, ‘Web 2.0: New challenges for the study of e-democracy in an era of informational exuberance’, *IS: A Journal of Law and Policy for the Information Society*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2009, p. 30.

¹¹ W. Lance Bennett, ‘The Personalization of politics: Political identity, social media, and changing patterns of participation’, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, vol. 644, no. 1, 2012, pp. 20–38; Mats Ekstrom, ‘Young people’s everyday political talk: A social achievement of democratic engagement’, *Journal of Youth Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2016, pp.1–19; Jay. G. Blumler and Stephen Coleman, ‘Democracy and the media—revisited’, *Javnost—The Public Journal of the European Institute for Communication and Culture*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2015, pp. 111–28.

¹² Lee Rainie, Aaron Smith, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Henry Brady, Sidney Verba, *Social Media and Political Engagement*, 2012, http://www.pewinternet.org/files/old-media/Files/Reports/2012/PIP_SocialMediaAndPoliticalEngagement_PDF.pdf; Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba and Henry E. Brady, ‘Weapon of the strong? Participatory inequality and the internet’, *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 487–509.

note the increasingly common phenomena of changing a Facebook profile picture to invoke empathy or solidarity with an event or cause.

Figure 5: Using Facebook for communicative politics¹³

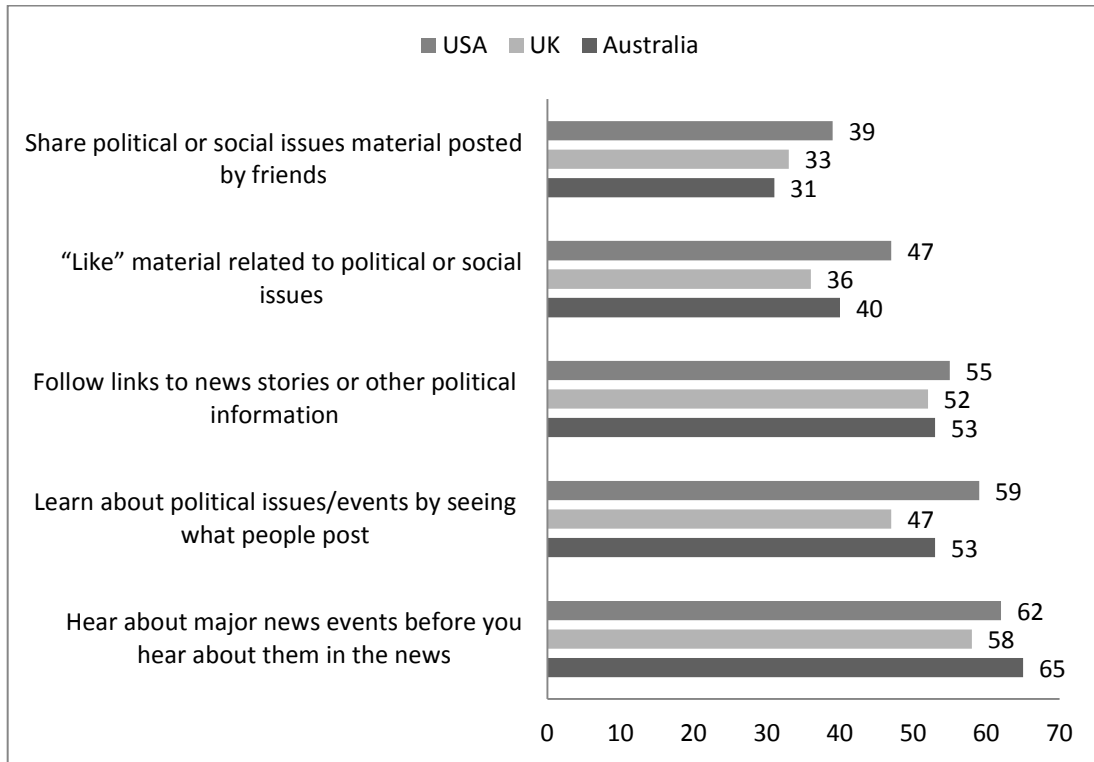
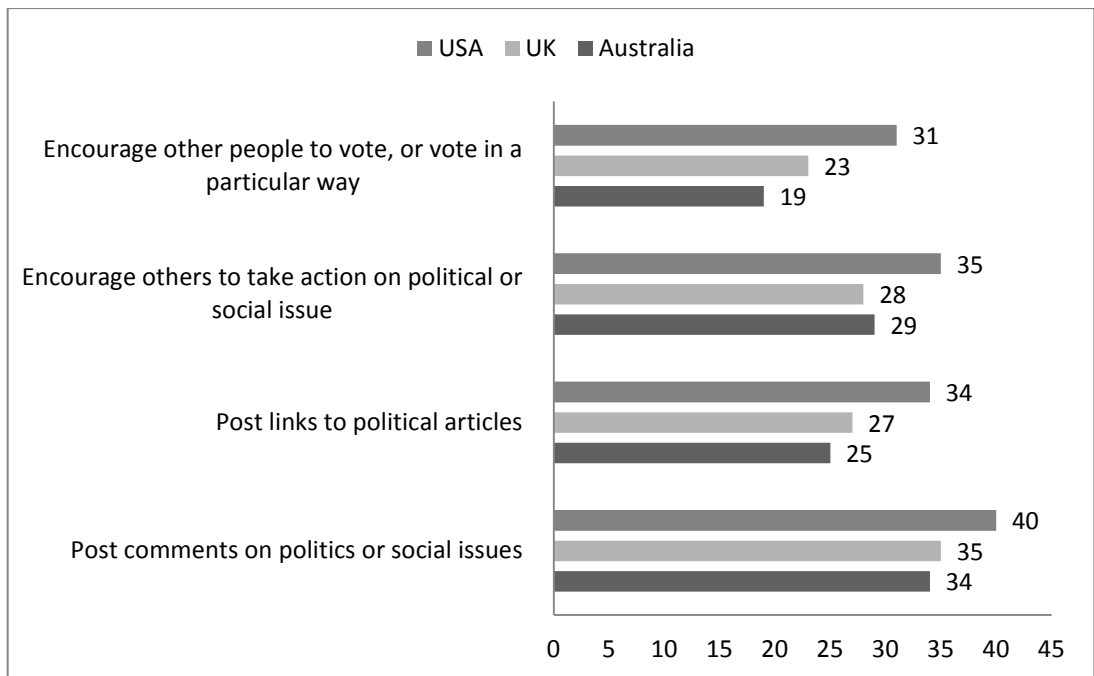


Figure 6: Using Facebook for proactive political engagement¹⁴



¹³ Adapted from Vromen, Xenos and Loader, op. cit.

¹⁴ Adapted from Vromen, Xenos and Loader, ibid.

Facebook has broad appeal as an avenue for youth engagement, and the communicative, symbolic and expressive forms of Facebook-based politics are the most widespread acts. Only six per cent of young people who use Facebook have *never* engaged in any of the nine acts in Figures 5 and 6. Considering just the proactive political acts on Facebook we still find large majorities of young people have engaged in at least one of these, as only 27 per cent have *never* done so. However, our qualitative data revealed that young people also have a considerable ambivalence about doing ‘politics’ on Facebook, as is detailed below. This also reflects the high levels of scepticism and feelings of exclusion many young people hold about formal, electoral politics in many advanced democracies.¹⁵

Twitter use is not ubiquitous in the same way as Facebook; and while a higher proportion of young people in the USA and the UK use it overall, this does not cause much variation in its use for politics beyond accessing news and information. For example, these figures range from a low of 16 per cent (i.e. 40 per cent of 40 per cent) of all young Australians to 26 per cent in UK, and 22 per cent in the USA read about news and politics on Twitter. However, only 10 per cent in Australia, 16 per cent in UK and 15 per cent in the USA discuss politics on Twitter. Overall the more politically interested and those from backgrounds with parents who had gone to university were most likely to use Twitter for politics. In the UK and USA, young men were also more likely than young women to tweet, retweet or reply on politics and news. This reinforces the findings of a large body of research that the use of Twitter for politics is exclusive to a select group of citizens who are already politically engaged and are large consumers of news media.¹⁶ Facebook is more likely to provide a space for incidental exposure to political content due to its more extensive networks and frequent use by individuals.¹⁷ The Pew Research Center conducted a study in the USA on an all ages group and found that just 16 per cent of registered voters followed a politician or party on either Facebook or Twitter, but that those under 50 were more likely to do so and the most common major reason for doing this was to feel more connected with the politician or party.¹⁸ Our research also

¹⁵ Ibid; see Erik Amna and Joakim Ekman, ‘Standby citizens: Diverse faces of political passivity’, *European Political Science Review*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2014, pp. 261–81.

¹⁶ Marija Anna Bekafigo and Allan McBride, ‘Who tweets about politics? Political participation of Twitter users during 2011 gubernatorial elections’, *Social Science Computer Review*, vol. 31, no. 5, 2013, pp. 625–43; Leticia Bode and Kajsa E. Dalrymple, ‘Politics in 140 characters or less: Campaign communication, network interaction, and political participation on Twitter’, *Journal of Political Marketing*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2016, pp. 311–32; Andreas Jungherr, ‘Twitter use in election campaigns: A systematic literature review’, *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 72–91; Peter Chen, *Australian Politics in a Digital Age*, ANU E-Press, Canberra, 2013.

¹⁷ Emily K. Vraga, Leticia Bode, Anne-Bennett Smithson and Sonya Troller-Renfree, ‘Blurred lines: Defining social, news, and political posts on Facebook’, *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2016, doi/abs/10.1080/19331681.2016.1160265.

¹⁸ Monica Anderson, ‘More Americans are using social media to connect with politicians’, *Pew Research*, May 19 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/19/more-americans-are-using-social-media-to-connect-with-politicians/>.

found a general openness from young people to engaging with both politicians and political celebrities on social media, but a wariness if they were not being either authentic or interactive.¹⁹

Table 1: Young citizens' use of Twitter for politics (per cent of all Twitter users)²⁰

Country	Australia	UK	USA
Per cent 16-29 year olds use Twitter	40 per cent	59 per cent	49 per cent
Read information about news and politics	41	44	45
Share information about news and politics (tweets or retweets)	28	31	36
Discuss politics or issues in the news (replying to others' tweets)	25	26	30
Follow politicians or government	34	29	31
Follow newsmakers/media	32	32	36
Follow celebrities who sometimes tweet about politics	50	50	48

Overall, The Civic Network project demonstrated that social media, particularly Facebook, has become an everyday source of news and information on politics, and is increasingly used by young people to show a personalised, symbolic solidarity with political issues. We also found that there is an equalising effect, with socioeconomic status not being the main divide between those who use social media for politics and those who do not, instead it is mainly driven by political interest and existing active engagement. However, in our online focus groups young people voiced their reluctance to actively 'do politics' on Facebook for fear of conflict or being corrected by others in their personal networks of friends and family.²¹ This reinforces our finding in Figures 1 and 2 that discussing politics with others is the key participatory act that young people still tend to do offline rather than online. Despite their own reluctance, the young people who participated in our qualitative research still saw promise in using social media to connect them to broader processes of formal politics. Perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, when asked the question, 'What do you think about politicians using Facebook and twitter?', our participants were generally favourable in their responses. There was little surprise that politicians were adopting social media

¹⁹ Brian D. Loader, Ariadne Vromen and Michael A. Xenos, 'Performing for the young networked citizen? Celebrity politics, social networking and the political engagement of young people', *Media, Culture and Society*, vol. 38, no. 3, 2016, pp. 400–19.

²⁰ Adapted from Vromen, *Digital Citizenship and Political Engagement*, op. cit., 2017.

²¹ See Ariadne Vromen, Brian D. Loader, Michael A. Xenos and Francesco Bailo, 'Everyday making through Facebook engagement: Young citizens' political interactions in Australia, UK and USA', *Political Studies*, vol. 64, no. 3, 2016, pp. 513–33.

and many respondents considered it essential for them to use such communication channels as a means of keeping up-to-date. As one person remarked, ‘if politicians do not connect through social media then they don’t connect at all’ (male, Australia). This was especially evident where participants believed it helped politicians to ‘connect’ with young people. For example:

[Social media] does, in fact, have the potential for getting the ‘audience’ to give feedback and have discussions, even if it is just among themselves. They can reply to posts and then to each other’s replies to get a good discussion going that way (female, USA).

While there was a strong expectation of a normalisation of the use of Facebook and Twitter by politicians, with the possibility for two-way interactive engagement, there was also a concern about the capacity of politicians to use social media appropriately. Our respondents were, for example, aware that politicians rarely answered online queries personally or posted content themselves, at least respondents did not realistically expect them to always do so. What respondents generally objected to was that they received no replies, and that politicians never engaged in discussions in person or appeared unaware of the interactive and participatory capacities of social media platforms.²²

The communicative shift in participation for organisations

I have argued above that individual and collective forms of citizen engagement are increasingly more likely to occur via online means, and that the interactive and communicative dimensions of social media use matter for political expression. But how do political organisations respond and adapt to this new context? What distinguishes ‘born digital’ organisations from political organisations? Does it also mean that new, citizen-driven issues make it onto the political agenda more often?

The field of digital politics has been dominated by individual levels analyses—either based on surveys of individuals’ recollection of what they do online, or increasingly scraped data analyses of what people, including elites and citizens, post online. Less often is the unit of analysis organisations that shape and influence the political agenda via advocacy, lobbying and campaigning. However, over the last five to ten years, digital politics research that focuses on organisation and new forms of collective action has been growing steadily. Three main challenges are offered by born digital organisations. First, they often adopt both formal and informal structures at the same time—that is hierarchical, bureaucratic structures *and* horizontal,

²² See Loader, Vromen and Xenos, 2016, op. cit., for further analysis.

networked structures. This means hybrid organisations emerged that had very little centralised infrastructure or resources and were nimbler than long established, heavily bureaucratic advocacy organisations. Second, complex layers of communication and campaign coordination are simply easier through using the internet, and able to reach more people who are targeted by data profiles of their political interests and past behaviours. Third, the often ad hoc nature of digital tools in campaigns means that individual involvement with organisations can be more fluid and temporary, rather than a long-term commitment of time or money.

David Karpf usefully summarised three generations of advocacy organisation types, which he described as identity, issue, and activity-based.²³ These types were broadly defined as epoch specific, but all three types of organisations continue to exist, and arguably the period of time in which an organisation was created has a large effect on its capacity to change and adapt to the digital context. In Australia, a union or a professional association is an example of a typical identity-based organisation, an environment or human rights organisation is an example of an issue-based organisation, and GetUp is an activity-based organisation. The Table below shows the contrast between activities for individuals, the way revenue is accrued, members are involved, and how to characterise an organisation’s role in advocacy. I would argue that all organisations have changed the range of activities available for members and

Table 2: The shift to hybrid online advocacy organisations²⁴

	1st Generation: Identity-based	2nd Generation: Issue-based	3rd Generation: Activity-based
Typical activities	Attend meetings, hold elected office, participate in civic activities	Write letters, sign petitions, mail donations	Attend local meet-ups, vote online, submit user-created content
Funding source	Membership dues	Direct mail, grants and patron donors	Online appeals (micro-donations), grants and patron donors
Organisation characteristics	Cross-class Membership Federations	Single issue Professional Advocacy orgs	Issue generalists Internet-mediated

²³ David Karpf, *The MoveOn Effect: The Unexpected Transformation of American Political Advocacy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012.

²⁴ Adapted from Karpf, *ibid.*

supporters to adapt to the digital context. However, it is both their approach to funding sources and their approach to advocacy that are less likely to adapt or change in light of the challenge presented by the younger born digital, third generation organisations. A fourth area of contrast, which is explained below, is the use of communicative devices and narrative that either drive fact-driven research or the use of storytelling.

I have conducted research on GetUp since they emerged in 2006 and my analysis of their evolution over time is a core part of my 2017 book, *Digital Citizenship and Political Engagement*. Karpf's 2012 book was mainly on how the Democratic Party aligned MoveOn, as a third generation activity-based digital advocacy organisation, transformed political advocacy in the USA. GetUp, a sister organisation to MoveOn through the international Online Progressive Engagement Network (OPEN), has had a similar effect in Australia, with many organisations now emulating its approach to internet-mediated forms of member participation and engagement. In particular, there has been a re-evaluation of traditional ideas of members as financial supporters, as is core to the second generation organisations, with members now seen as 'communication recipients'.²⁵ Supporter lists, still called member lists by some, are sent mobilising emails and supporters can pick and choose what actions to get involved in, from signing an online petition, writing a letter to a campaign target, attending a local campaign meeting or event, to donating money to fund advertising, billboards, and other forms of campaign work. All three kinds of advocacy organisations use email-based supporter lists, and have invested in database management to segment and target information and campaign actions at sections of their lists based on individuals' previous preferences and behaviours. They focus time and resources on building and analysing their supporter lists and jealously guard them from competitor advocacy organisations. However, there is a range in the level of sophistication with which advocacy groups either value or organise digital forms of mobilisation. This can be in contrast to their approach to facilitating longer term donors and offline participants.

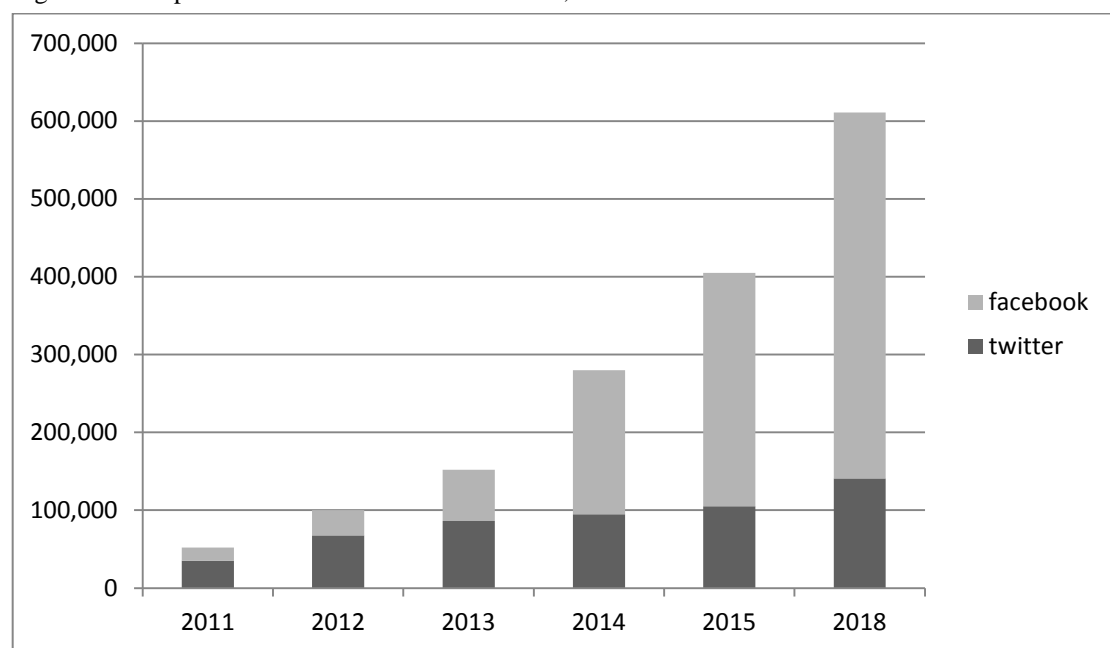
Most older organisations still use membership fees or direct mail monthly donations as their core source of funding. Third generation organisations have some funding from core donors, but for most of their revenue they rely on ad hoc micro donations that are specific to campaign calls to action made via email or on their social media pages, predominantly Facebook. For example, GetUp's annual revenue in 2016 was \$10 million, 25 per cent of which came from mainly monthly donations from one per cent of their membership base of over one million supporters and the other 75 per cent was from ad hoc, micro donations. The use of campaign driven micro donations was pioneered and then consolidated by Organizing for America and the

²⁵ Ibid.

Obama Presidential 2008 and 2012 campaigns. In Australia, many political parties and advocacy organisations make appeals for campaign specific micro donations, but most do this to grow their supporter lists with the hope of converting the smaller donation into a regular donation or paid membership. Only the small group of third generation, born digital organisations have been able to turn this into a sustainable funding model.

While email is still the main way of creating supporter lists, email itself is becoming passé, and click-through rates for even opening emails, let alone taking an action requested by an email, are in decline.²⁶ Advocacy organisations have also needed to invest in harnessing their web presence and social media pages, mainly Facebook, and to a lesser extent Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat, to diversify the potential audience for supporters and activists. Yet the active use of both organisational websites and Facebook pages are highly variable. Most organisations still use these sites to broadcast information rather than to mobilise or organise their supporter base into interaction and discussion with the organisation, or into taking an action either online or offline. Here again, GetUp is an anomaly as over time it has deliberately built up its followers on Facebook, from just 17,000 in 2011 to nearly 500,000 in 2018 as shown in Figure 7 below.

Figure 7: GetUp Social media followers 2011-2015, 2018²⁷



²⁶ David Karpf, *Analytic Activism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016.

²⁷ Adapted from Vromen, *Digital Citizenship and Political Engagement*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2017.

It has done this to diversify the supporter base and GetUp community to a younger demographic. During the 2016 national election campaign GetUp extensively used paid targeted advertising and political profiling on Facebook to distribute its messaging to potential new audiences.²⁸ Twitter is used in a different way to mainly target and get attention from political elites, especially the media, and GetUp currently has 140,000 Twitter followers. GetUp has only just over 7000 followers on Instagram, and there is little evidence of any Australian advocacy organisation using it successfully as a campaign tool.

Another diffusion from GetUp to other advocacy organisations in Australia is the shift towards use of narrative driven storytelling approaches in campaigns that also encourage participants to develop personal action frames to express themselves and connect with like-minded others. Many Australian advocacy organisations now share a commitment to a storytelling and values-led strategy, often understood as a ‘theory of change’ approach. Storytelling is a recognised social movement device and analytical approach for explaining politics via cause and effect relations, through a retelling of a detailed story, rather than by appeals to mainly logic, statistical data and evidence.²⁹ Stories used in many advocacy campaigns characteristically have a plot and identifiable characters, a beginning and middle to the story, but the recipient of the story can create, or rather act out, the end. Stories focus on how language or rhetoric is used, and the underlying ‘common sense’ emotional frames used for the delivery of political messages. This style of campaigning has been successful against better resourced and influential opponents when stories build a popular narrative of ‘people over power’, and focus on moral urgency rather than technical rationality. Storytelling has been used in campaigns around Australia on issues as diverse as climate change, the Great Barrier Reef, workers’ rights, marriage equality, refugees and mental health. While the use of storytelling in Australia was inherited from the 2008 Obama presidential campaign, and pioneered by GetUp and Australian Progress, it is now increasingly used by a large range of conservative as well as progressive advocacy organisations. For example, we saw storytelling used by Christian groups during the 2017 marriage equality plebiscite campaign and, after the 2016 election, many actors ranging from Australian Conservatives leader Cory Bernardi to the Business Council of Australia suggested their organisations needed to engage in a strategic rethink and adopt new grassroots campaigning and digital tactics.

The online petitions platform Change.org has come to the fore in Australia due to the communicative and digital turn in participation and growth in third generation, activity-based organisations. Petitioning itself has a long history. Charles Tilly located

²⁸ For more analysis of this, see Ariadne Vromen, ‘GetUp! in election 2016’ in *Double Disillusion: The 2016 Australian Federal Election*, ANU Press, Acton ACT, 2018, pp. 397–419.

²⁹ Francesca Polletta, Pang Ching Bobby Chen, Beth Gharrity Gardner, and Alice Motes, ‘The sociology of storytelling’, *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 37, 2011, pp. 109–30.

them as already part of repertoires of contention in his studies of 18th century Britain. In *Democratic Phoenix* Pippa Norris analysed them as non-conventional acts, along with protest events.³⁰ Yet the use and signing of petitions are now arguably mainstream—many Australians have signed one and online petitions themselves are underpinned by both the logic of creating large numbers of supporters and an internet logic of sharing and diffusion.

There are three main types of online petition platforms—those hosted by governments or parliament, those run by advocacy organisations where citizens can either sign and/or start a petition (for example, GetUp and their citizen-led platform Community Run, and the union-run Megaphone), and commercial platforms such as Change.org. However, the existing research mainly focuses on government-hosted sites, especially successful petition platforms in the US, UK, Germany and Scotland. The accessibility and usability of these petition websites differs, as does their approach which ranges from maximalist to minimalist and mainly centres on a contrast between citizen versus parliamentary control. A minimalist model usually simply transfers the style and feel of a written petition into the online context, and many online petitions still require sponsorship by a member of parliament as a prerequisite for recognition and standing of the petition.³¹ The Queensland and Tasmanian state parliaments have long-standing petition platforms, while Victorian Parliament introduced one last year. At the national level, the House of Representatives introduced an online petitions platform in mid-2016. To date it has had 256 petitions started on it, with a total of 137,000 signatories.³² From a cursory look there was an official response to approximately 40 per cent of these petitions. The minimalist and relatively recent use of online petitions in Australian parliaments has opened space for successful and extensive citizen engagement with extraparliamentary platforms such as Change.org.

The international founder of Change.org, Ben Rattray, suggests that the more personal or emotive the issue of a petition, the more powerful the response from the public.³³ The focus on emotive, personal stories is important to new kinds of mobilisation and citizen-led activism, as noted above. For our current project we studied over 17,000 Change.org petitions with over 3.5 million signatories, three-quarters of whom

³⁰ Pippa Norris, *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Democratic Activism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002.

³¹ C. Grover, 'E-Petitions', Parliament of Victoria paper, 2016.

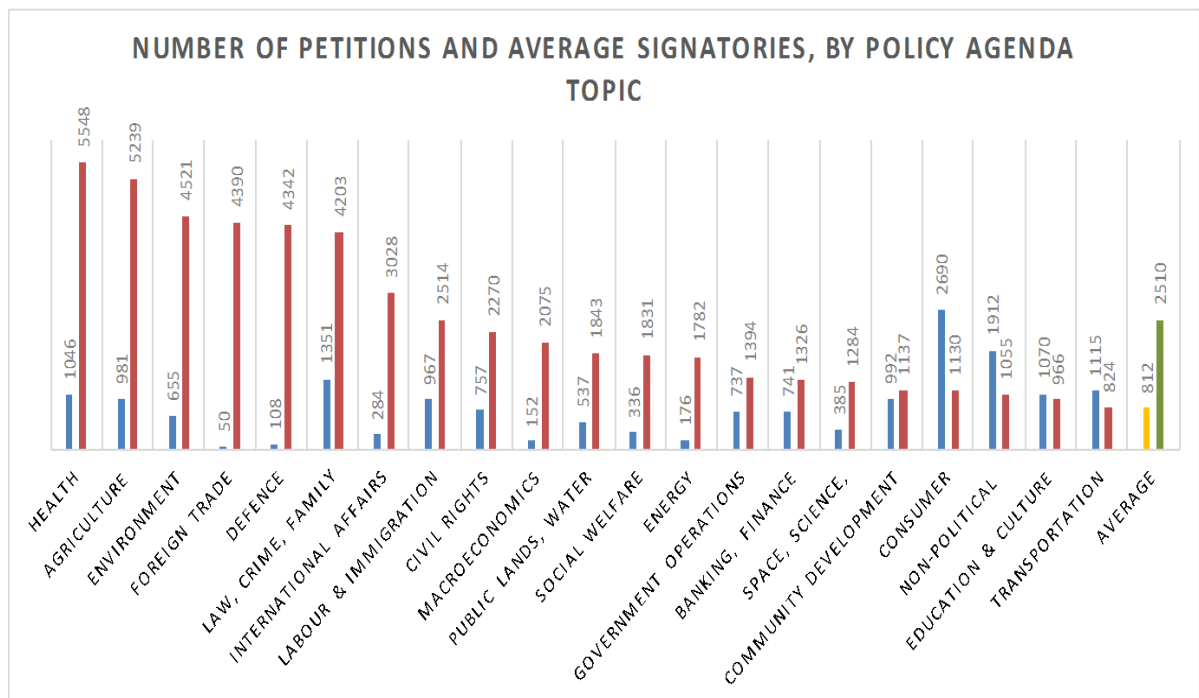
³² House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions, *Making Voices Heard: Inquiry into the e-petitioning system of the House of Representatives Petitions Committee*, 2018, www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Petitions/Inquiryintoe-petitions/Report_1

³³ Nick Bryant, 'Why Change.org's "army of Davids" is neutering more global Goliaths', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 March 2018.

had only ever signed onto one petition.³⁴ We found that 50 per cent of petitions are targeted at one of the three levels of Australian government. Petitions are classified as open, closed, or as a ‘Victory’, but a declared ‘Victory’ accounts for only five per cent of the total, or 10 per cent if excluding open petitions, demonstrating that most petitions do not directly change policy or politics, however some may still generate public attention or debate. We used the Australian Policy Agendas project codebook (adapted from Dowding and Martin) to code the issues on which citizens have launched Change.org campaigns.³⁵

As seen in Figure 8, the numbers of petitions are not evenly distributed across policy code areas. The top areas are health, law and crime, transport, and education (each about seven per cent of our dataset), and together consumer and non-political petitions make up 27 per cent of all the petitions. There is a larger than average response by signatories to many policy agendas topics, such as health, agriculture (which includes many animal rights petitions) and the environment. By contrast, consumer and non-political petitions with above average numbers of petitions started on Change.org have far less average sign-ons than petitions on other topics. For example, during our timeframe, there were over 2000 petitions on consumer issues but the average number

Figure 8:



³⁴ Darren Halpin, Ariadne Vromen, Michael Vaughan and Mahin Raissi, ‘Online petitioning and politics: The development of *Change.org* in Australia’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 2018, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10361146.2018.1499010>.

³⁵ Keith Dowding and Aaron Martin, *Policy Agendas in Australia*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, UK, 2017.

of signatories on petitions is only 1130. Yet overall, law and crime has attracted well above the average number of petitions and a substantially higher than average number of signatories. In new work we are particularly exploring the underrepresentation of macro-economic issues in our petitions dataset, even though these are the policy agendas—including government taxation, revenue and spending—that dominate national level legislation.

The growing awareness of the dark side of digital and lack of a democratic panacea

Throughout this paper I have been somewhat optimistic about how the digital context has transformed political engagement for Australians. I have pointed out growing levels of political equality among young people in their capacity to engage in politics using digital tools and social media platforms such as Facebook in particular. There are more opportunities than ever before for a wider range of voices to be represented in politics. I have pointed out the emergence of new kinds of born digital advocacy organisations that have lowered the threshold for organisation and engagement. These organisations have challenged the advocacy and interest groups sector more broadly to think about how they activate their membership and use social media to communicate and fundraise. I also pointed out that the communicative turn in political engagement and organising is significant. The use of storytelling and narrative driven campaigning, as opposed to arguments based purely on logic and statistics, has grown to the point where many established political organisations, from political parties to lobby groups, now also use these techniques in their promotional work. Storytelling has facilitated the success of new online petitioning platforms such as Change.org that are driven by a social media logic of sharing and diffusion to gain large numbers of supporters quickly.

Yet I am not naively sanguine about the digital context effect on politics. There are already glimpses in my long-term research that many remain disaffected by politics and conflict-driven debate on social media only exacerbates this. Further, there is also some evidence that contemporary advocacy using digital storytelling focuses more on issues than can be personalised and less on more collective issues such as macro-economic or infrastructure reform. Storytelling is also increasingly used by some groups to perpetuate division and a society underpinned by us versus them politics. Some of these concerns have led me to work with collaborators on a new project that explores the digital rights and responsibilities citizens have. It especially explores what we could consider the ‘dark side’ of the everyday use of for-profit digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Change.org that monetise our actions mainly via targeted advertising, and what future regulations Australian society might expect.

The digital rights research agenda focuses particularly on topical issues of internet-based privacy, surveillance and fair speech. In short, we found that a majority of Australians are *concerned* by online privacy violations by other people, governments or corporations and especially by social media platforms. Most want to see better protections for our digital data put in place, and this desire will only have increased since the scandalous use of Facebook data by Cambridge Analytica became an issue of mainstream media debate. We also found that Australians are not strongly wedded to the North American ideal of absolute speech freedom online. Just over a third (37 per cent) of those surveyed agreed that they should ‘be free to say and do what I want online’, but 30 per cent disagreed and a third expressed reservations about the idea. Young people under 40 and men were more likely than women to assert their right to free expression. When we asked about specific instances of online speech we found that 56 per cent think it is acceptable to criticise government policies online, but only 31 per cent think it is ever acceptable to criticise religious organisations or beliefs. Similarly, only 26 per cent think it is acceptable to criticise minority groups. Men are much more likely than women to think this is okay, and to an extent older people. While most Australians had not experienced negative impacts from risky or harmful online speech themselves, 39 per cent have been affected by mean or abusive remarks, and 27 per cent have had personal content posted on social media without their consent. More than was the case for privacy issues, Australians want greater regulation of online discussion environments.³⁶

With these growing concerns among citizens about the ubiquitous use and misuses of digital media, how ought representative democracy and governments respond? Unsurprisingly, I have no simple answers beyond that government and other political actors, including politicians, need to adapt and be responsive to citizens’ practices and concerns. There can be no one size fits all inclusive strategy—people are diverse and need diverse strategies. Yet foremost we are beyond the dutiful citizen era of collective allegiance to political processes and ideologies. Politics is personal now, and all kinds of political actors need to think harder about how they can pander not to self-interest, but focus meaningfully on how collective identities and ideas can be mobilised in an era of increasing inequality and exclusion. As part of this, I have argued that while social media is a normalised, communicative space for politics and everyday life, *it is not a democratic panacea*. There are light *and* dark sides of horizontal networks—conflict avoidance, censure and surveillance need to be recognised, as well as optimistic stories of alternative spaces with new voices. Increasingly we need to ask whether social media can be a safe space for young people to exercise political voice, as well as whose voices are prioritised by both

³⁶ Gerard Goggin, Ariadne Vromen, Kimberlee Weatherall, Fiona Martin, Adele Webb, Lucy Sunman and Francesco Bailo, *Digital Rights in Australia*, University of Sydney, NSW, 2017.

politics and by algorithms. Yet overall formal ‘Politics’ itself needs to change. Can it abandon the increasingly adversarial partisanship and polarisation that increases citizen disaffection and trust? Can we reset and relearn the terms of debate and disagreement to focus on unifying ideas and not be so personalised and polarised? And lastly, how can we all revalue and reintegrate citizens—their views, needs and experiences—as more than voters but as an essential part of politics itself?



Question — You spoke about spaces that are explicitly political. Scott Wright has a theory about how politics is performed in spaces that are not explicitly political, like discussion forums about daily life or hobbies, and in these spaces people have arguments and disagreements and that is how they come to politics. I was wondering if you could comment on people who appear to be less interested in politics but who are doing it in a different way.

Ariadne Vromen — Scott Wright’s research has been very influential on my own, particularly his work on third spaces and everyday spaces. With the work we are doing on Change.Org, we found a lot of people would not necessarily classify their petitions as capital ‘P’ political, even when they are about issues of power and redistribution and wanting some sort of response from a political actor, a corporation or a government. Part of our process was to say that these things are political because they are meaningful to citizens and on the issues that matter to them. Like Facebook more broadly could be that third space because politics is not the main reason people go on Facebook. Unsurprisingly, people go on Facebook to have that connection and communication with family and friends who might be around the country or around the world, or it might be to follow their interests or passions—I follow a few too many dog-related Facebook pages at the moment!—so politics is incidental. A lot of people have incidental exposure to political debate and issues. So I guess it is really important to think about how they feel about having those third spaces to have a say, to be heard and to make a difference.

Question — I was really interested in your data about the reluctance of young people to participate in politics online. I am not sure if you are aware of this but this year in the University of Canberra’s *Digital News Report*³⁷ we asked questions specifically about that and we found that people aged in their 30s and under were more reluctant

³⁷ *Digital News Report: Australia 2018*, <https://www.canberra.edu.au/research/faculty-research-centres/nmrc/digital-news-report-australia-2018>.

than other age groups to express their political views online. We also found that in Australia we have a greater reluctance than in many other countries. I wondered in comparison to the UK and US whether you found that. That is my first question.

My second question, given that there is this reluctance and part of the strategy of these advocacy organisations is to get people involved in a discussion, have you found whether or not they are shifting to closed group messaging apps like WhatsApp to have that discussion? We are finding that in countries where free speech is limited people are going to WhatsApp and other closed spaces because they feel safer.

Ariadne Vromen — That is a really good point. I think there is clearly a shift to other platforms away from Facebook, even if it is to Facebook Messenger where people get to decide who is a part of their group and sometimes those groups can be really large. But there is a shift to Messenger or WhatsApp and people see that as a known space where they can talk about issues that matter to them. That is definitely going on, especially for young people.

I do not have a lot of the research on it but I think the comparative angle is really interesting. We found in general that young Americans were the most participatory, the Australians were in the middle and the young Britons were the least, even though for young Britons there have been bigger issues around turnout. Brexit and the recent elections show they are less likely to vote. I think all of those issues are interrelated about whether or not people feel that they have a voice, that they have representation and that the issues that matter to them are on the policy agenda. Part of what we are interested in is if there is that relationship there. In other work we have looked at the relationship between the issues that matter to people and they were quite different across the three countries as well.

Question — I was just wondering if you could talk a little more about the ‘dark side’, the idea that anti-social media is a crime against democracy, and the use of online intimidation and threats to silence politicians and so on.

Ariadne Vromen — The Digital Rights Project really grew from this concern about a few different things. Firstly, all of these social media spaces were not set up necessarily as a political space and to encourage political engagement. Most of them are for-profit sites that monetise our data and sell our product to advertisers to target us, to profile us, in that kind of market relationship. Increasingly, what we are interested in is how political organisations are using these techniques as well. We have seen the controversy around the Trump election and also Brexit, about how organisations like Cambridge Analytica were using processes to create profiles of people and target often quite negative advertising at people, often to depress their

turnout or change their vote altogether. This is controversial but then all kinds of organisations are using these processes so maybe we also need to think about the positive sides of how targeted advertising and profiling are used to encourage sharing and to encourage the spreading of different kinds of stories and agendas as well as seeing the dark side.

I think the other thing you are referring to in particular is trolling and most people on social media, on digital media are not trolling. That is not the way they approach the use of digital media in their everyday lives but increasingly it is becoming a problem. I think you are right—political actors from all kinds of persuasions are targeted with a lot of negative feedback and a lot of trolling which does not create a space for interaction or meaningful, authentic engagement between citizens and political actors. I guess that is why we found that people want more regulation in this space. They want particular accounts to be shut down. They want to be able to appeal to Facebook and have slanderous posts taken down. I think this is the point where we have the broader debate about the role of government in regulating here and about our expectations that these platforms will themselves regulate speech and the answers are not simple or easy. That is partly why my answer is to recommend we think about regulation but also think about how we get to a point where we can engage in debate and disagreement that is constructive rather than detrimental and mean and exclusive and shutting down all kinds of discussion or difference.

Question — I work in the federal parliament and one of my roles is around how the Parliament does digital outreach. I had a conversation with a Presiding Officer from another parliament and they referred to the way that disruptive technologies have influenced other industries, for example Uber and Airbnb, and said if parliaments are not able to adapt there is potential for disruption like that which will be to the detriment of parliaments and how they operate. I am interested in your thoughts about whether that is a concern and to what extent institutions like the federal parliament should consider new movements like Change.org and GetUp as part of the new society that we work in and where that interface is with this institution.

Ariadne Vromen — Again it is not easy to answer. I think your focus on disruption is interesting and I guess you are thinking about the mismatch between what capital ‘P’ politics cares about and the kinds of things citizens are getting active and mobilising on, and how you increase that conversation in an interactive, productive and responsive way. In our work we found that young people were uncomfortable about discussing politics with their friends and family but on the other hand they all wanted to see politicians and political actors on social media and interacting with them. They thought that was a really good thing but they were also very clear about what they thought interaction meant and what authenticity meant. They said we do not

want an anonymous political staffer writing the post. We want to know it is them. We want a more personal connection and we want to feel like we have been listened to.

How do we shift to that process where people feel like they are heard and they are included? The petitioning process does a little bit of that at a broader, aggregated level, but how do our political institutions adapt to this context where people expect those horizontal connections and horizontal networks. They are less about traditional forms of hierarchy that politics or even those first or second generation advocacy organisations are built on. I would say relax a little bit more and give citizens a little bit more control and benefit of the doubt, particularly for things like petitioning platforms within parliament and within institutions. And if you are going to have it, you need to promote it and you need to make it easy and accessible. You also need to make content really engaging and sharable. I do not think it is an easy solution but I think there are different ways it can be done and Scottish Parliament is a really good example of a different way of doing much of that work.